



'I helped my neighbour move yesterday - you can't rescue everyone.' Photographee.eu/Shutterstock

How we use good deeds to justify immoral behaviour

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We all like to think of ourselves as morally sound individuals. However in doing so we often assume that morality is static – that we are consistently moral to some extent over time. In reality, research suggests that most of us will behave in contradictory ways and act both morally and immorally from time to time. Interestingly, when we think about our past moral actions, we are likely to engage in compensatory behaviour and act immorally going forward.

For instance, if you recently donated to charity, you may donate less money at a future charity event or be less willing to volunteer. This has been termed **moral licensing**, and describes how previous engagement in moral behaviour provides people with moral “credits” that then affords them with a ticket to subsequently engage in morally questionable behaviour.

The consequences of this can be quite serious, and happens even when people are merely anticipating future engagement. One study showed that people who expected to engage in some future moral action, such as in a fundraiser or donating blood, were more likely to pick a white candidate over a black candidate as being suitable for a job.

Moral licensing has also attracted attention in the area of **corporate social responsibility**. This term can broadly be thought of as an organisation’s focus beyond the bottom line – how it acts towards its

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stakeholders, the environment, and society. For example, Kenneth Lay, the former CEO of Enron – a company notoriously known for its accounting fraud which ultimately led to its collapse in 2001 – was noted to be a keen philanthropist. It may well be that he felt that his philanthropic efforts provided him with moral credits, allowing him to subsequently endorse the negative goings on within the company.

This view is in fact reinforced by research. One study that looked at moral licensing within the organisational context showed that prior corporate social responsibility of CEOs was linked to more corporate social irresponsibility later. Interest in moral licensing has even extended to areas such as energy conservation. One study showed that residents reduced their water consumption when exposed to a water conservation programme. However, at the same time their electrical consumption was shown to have increased in comparison to a control group.



Previous organisational CSR has been linked to subsequent social irresponsibility. David D'Amico/Flickr

Currently we are not sure what the psychological processes underpinning moral licensing are. Does prior moral behaviour really provide credits that can be withdrawn to allow engagement in a questionable act – because we feel we have “earned” the right to do so? Or could it be that prior moral behaviour changes the meaning of the subsequent questionable behaviour? For instance, if we have established through previous actions that we are not racially biased, we may more easily convince ourselves that picking a white candidate over a black candidate was due to some factor other than race.

But are others willing to accept our moral license? One study looked at the reactions of individuals to a white speaker who made a potentially offensive comment directed at African Americans. When this comment was preceded by “I’m not racist or anything, but ...”, the white people rated the speaker as slightly less racist, while the black people judged the speaker as more racist. And so, where the

targeted group was concerned, they were less likely to license the speaker – causing the speaker’s initial claim of not being racist to backfire.

Moral cleansing

The opposite to moral licensing is also true. We know that when people recall their recent immoral behaviour, they express greater willingness to engage in compensatory moral actions. This is referred to as **moral cleansing** – demonstrating the dynamic nature of moral behaviour.

For instance, Donald Trump’s quick decision in April 2017 to launch a missile strike in Syria in response to a chemical attack by the Syrian regime, drew praise from his critics as being “the right thing to do”. However, as Hillary Clinton **pointed out**, “we cannot in one breath speak of protecting Syrian babies and in the next close American doors to them” – referring to a ban on receiving refugees.

It could well be argued that Trump’s morally questionable previous behaviour motivated him to engage in “moral cleansing” by launching the applauded missile strike. But the example clearly shows that while this may have assured him about his own morality, it takes more consistency to be accepted as moral by others.



Trump received praise for his response to a chemical attack in Syria – but didn’t want to receive refugees to the US. Gage Skidmore/ Flickr

Finally, there is some evidence to suggest that moral licensing seems to be apparent only for **private** transgressions, such as donating to charity privately as opposed to doing so publicly. It seems as individuals, we seek to protect, and in some cases even bolster our reputation through public displays of moral actions. And engaging in morally questionable behaviour that we ourselves feel we have

earned isn't something we want to broadcast. Indeed, research has evidenced that those people who are publicly charitable do benefit from reputational enhancement.

Being good isn't always easy. When it comes to behaving morally, it appears there is a balance we all strive to achieve, so that personally we can remain assured of our own moral goodness.



Psychology **Morality** **Corporate social responsibility (CSR)** **Morals**